WORKERS VANGUARD

Supplement
13 June 2026

The Democrats Ruined Public Housing

Only the Working Class Can Save It

Rats, roaches and bedbugs. Mold, asbestos and lead. Leaks, collapsing ceilings and broken elevators. Cops and management and tenant associations that work with them both. This is everyday life for black and Hispanic people in the heavily segregated projects. There's almost never a win, especially when the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) blames tenants for everything breaking down. It's not like every NYC administration, both Democrat and Republican, hasn't defunded public housing. It's not like NYCHA, with its corrupt officials, hasn't mismanaged funds. Most tenants know the neglect is purposeful. Public housing has been left to decay into a horrible state so that those in control can say that they don't have the money to fix the projects. This is where tenants find themselves today, as NYCHA insists that the only way to take care of repairs is through "conversion" from Section 9 to Section 8.

This "conversion" is actually privatization. Whether the Trust, RAD or the PACT initiative, all are scams to throw the black and Hispanic masses into the streets. Promises of newly renovated apartments are overshadowed by everything from endless water leaks to the gas explosion in Boston Secor Houses, where a man lost his life. Evictions are only adding to the chaos and inflaming the homeless crisis. The new mayor, Mamdani, is pushing ahead with the privatization, threatening tenants with slumlords taking over their homes or straight-up displacement.

There is anger in the projects, anger at the abuse, oppression and decay. While there is no mass movement to defend public housing right now, the anger is apparent. There are battles taking place in different developments to stop the privatization and demolitions. But what's preventing this anger from growing into a powerful movement that ignites NYC's working masses to defend public housing?

The fight for public housing has always been attached to the Democrats, but their role has never been good. If they're not stomping on the projects, the Democrats only get involved in the daily problems of tenants to keep a lid on the just anger that could explode and challenge their hold on society. The Democrats are no friends of the black and brown people living in public housing. They are the very reason why conditions in the projects are so bad. And they maintain the brutal oppression of the black and Hispanic masses throughout racist capitalist America. The fight to save the projects, bring them up to quality standards and break down segregation in housing cannot make any progress in alliance with these politicians. To get anywhere, this fight must be linked to the working class.

NYC's Projects: Segregated and Starved of Funds

Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, who had lost his wife to tuberculosis due to poor housing conditions, and Louis Pink started NYCHA in 1935. The idea was to completely demolish the city's overcrowded, disease-infested and crime-ridden slums with publicly funded buildings that provided plumbing, light and ventilation. But public housing was not designed to house the city's slum tenants. It was constructed to house the white working class, which had been beaten down by the Great Depression. It was segregated housing built on the bones of displaced tenement residents. NYC's elite, along with state officials, poured money into the program. This wasn't out of the kindness of their hearts, but because they had an interest in stopping the spread of disease and housing the working poor who flooded the city during the manufacturing boom.

The 1940s and '50s saw the rapid construction of NYCHA complexes. The expansion of housing and industry overlapped

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Spartacist League/U.S., section of the International Communist League (Fourth Internationalist)
Box 1377 GPO, New York, NY 10116 • (212) 732-7860 • iclfi.org • vanguard@tiac.net • @WorkersVanguard

Chicago: (312) 563-0441
chicagospartacist@sbcglobal.net

Los Angeles: (213) 380-8239
slsycla@sbcglobal.net

New York: (212) 267-1025
nysl@tiac.net

Oakland: (510) 839-0851
slbayarea@fastmail.net

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the Great Migration of black people from the South and Puerto Ricans fleeing the island after the failure of Operation Bootstrap. These changes to the city's racial composition caused housing-rights leaders to demand the desegregation of public housing. The racial makeup of the projects did change, but not because activists won the fight for integrated housing. A series of benefits and low-interest mortgages were offered to white people living in public housing, allowing them to move out. Just as black and Hispanic working people were gaining access to public housing and higher education at CUNY, manufacturing jobs dried up, and in the '70s a financial crisis rocked NYC.

In collaboration with NY State's Emergency Financial Control Board, Democratic mayor Abraham Beame and his liberal Housing Commissioner Roger Starr slashed funds to public housing. The attacks didn't stop there either. The city also cut back essential services like sanitation in minority neighborhoods, started charging tuition at CUNY and went after the unions. These measures weren't taken just to balance the city budget at the expense of the black and Hispanic population, but also to chase minorities out of the city. Starr infamously argued:

> "We should not encourage people to stay where their job possibilities are daily becoming more remote. Stop the Puerto Ricans and the rural blacks from living in the city…reverse the role of the city…it can no longer be a place of opportunity…Our urban system is based on the theory of taking the peasant and turning him into an industrial worker. Now there are no industrial jobs. Why not keep him a peasant?" (*Jacobin*, January 10, 2018)

The cuts to public housing were devastating and set the stage for its current condition. But to take the heat off themselves, the politicians blamed the decay on the residents and "their moral failures."

The Democrats continued their effort to bring down public housing by defunding it at all levels of government. In the 1990s, Clinton's HOPE VI program was publicized as an "urban revitalization" measure to demolish dilapidated projects and replace them with mixed-income housing. Most of the demolished housing was never reconstructed, and the demolitions included buildings that weren't even in distress. All this displaced thousands of black and Hispanic tenants.

In Chicago, Democratic mayor Richard M. Daley's "Plan of Transformation" succeeded in demolishing almost all public housing there, again affecting the black and brown masses. The whole plan of defund, deflect and demolish (or privatize) became the standard. Obama's housing secretary, Julián Castro, began the Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD). Through the RAD program, apartments are converted from Section 9 public housing to the Section 8 housing voucher program to assist people renting from private landlords. Although the converted units are said to still be part of public housing, this is a lie. The developers lease the buildings from NYCHA and run them just like private landlords.

The RAD program spread throughout the U.S. and finally came to NYC in 2018, where then-mayor, Democrat Bill de Blasio, embraced it to aggressively push 62,000 NYCHA units into privatization. De Blasio said: "We have an opportunity to undo decades of neglect and mismanagement, and we have to take it…. These partnerships are one of our best-proven tools to deliver critical repairs." But these partnerships haven't improved the lives of people in public housing. If anything, living conditions have worsened, and evictions have skyrocketed. Ocean Bay Houses is the best and worst example of this, as its tenants have seen barely any repairs, but a drastic increase in evictions, under RAD.

Mamdani: NYC's Biggest Slumlord

Now it's Mamdani's turn. Promoted as a socialist mayor, Mamdani has taken the lead in beating down the projects and their black and brown residents. It's no accident that Mamdani pulled $662 million from NYCHA and gave it to private developers. He has committed himself to real estate interests, just like every other Democratic politician. Mamdani is able to get away with this because of his slick talk of affordable housing.

Decent, low-cost housing is necessary, but what Mamdani is pushing is no solution to the needs of the working class and homeless people. Look at housing lotteries like Housing Connect. Some of their affordable apartments require a $100,000 minimum annual income or more, which disqualifies much of NYC's working masses. So, who is this housing meant to be affordable for? Then there are times when workers aren't poor enough to meet requirements, and so they are again denied housing opportunities. This has only created resentment between the working masses and the impoverished population.

After just a few months in office, Mamdani has attacked the most oppressed sections of NYC. In addition to preparing NYCHA's privatization, he's moving forward with the demolition of the Fulton and Elliott-Chelsea houses in the ritzy Chelsea neighborhood. This demolition threatens the tenants of 18 buildings with homelessness. They have fought back, so NYCHA has done everything it can to intimidate tenants, like getting the cops to harass them. It also made their lives a living hell by shutting off heat and hot water during the winter. Where has Mamdani been? Busy blocking the funding of CityFHEPS, a lifeline used by black and Hispanic homeless people that helps them obtain permanent housing.

Tenant leaders and housing advocates are hoping that Mamdani will come to his senses. But he won't because he's the new slumlord of the projects and partners with other slumlords like Wavecrest Management. Looking to other Democratic Party politicians won't help either, even those who claim to want to defend public housing. These Democrats want to keep the fight within the court system or at the steps of City Hall. Why? They know that to win something real for the projects means unleashing the power of the black and brown working masses who live there.

This is unacceptable to them. Labor/black/brown power could go up against the racist capitalist system that keeps the oppressed down, which is the same system the Democrats defend. Some say that this system can be tweaked to better serve the black and Hispanic population. But you cannot tweak a system whose whole foundation was built on racial oppression and continues to thrive off it. Neither can the dire needs of black and Hispanic people be addressed by a system that is in economic and social decay, especially when the ruling class always tries to put the weight of that decay onto the oppressed.

Workers and the Projects, Unite!

This raises the question: If tenants can't rely on the politicians, then who can they rely on? The only way to change both the neglected state of the projects and the oppressed position of black and Hispanic people is to get the working class behind the housing fight. Tenants don't have to look far either. The projects are made up of workers. Some are in unions like DC37, TWU, 32BJ and 1199, just to name a few. The power

is right there, it just needs to be organized and directed at a system that keeps us down, both as workers and as minorities.

But why should the unions join the fight against privatization? Many think that whatever happens to public housing will end there, but privatization will have ripple effects. The PACT initiative has already increased evictions and its expansion will only cause more, especially if Trump strangles Section 8 as he is threatening. The city is already going through a homeless crisis. Evictions will only add to the chaos.

The irony is that there are thousands of vacant apartments throughout all NYCHA developments that could house much of the city's homeless population. But the city purposely keeps these apartments empty because it's more profitable to have them vacant. This is a well drawn-out plan to replace the current residents with richer, whiter tenants, especially in neighborhoods of prime real estate like Chelsea, Harlem and the Upper East Side.

Privatization never benefits the workers, whether they live in public housing or not. That's because if the city goes after the most vulnerable without any pushback, it will give the private slumlords the green light to continue bumping up rents while leaving apartments in disrepair. The rent getting too damn high for apartments that haven't been updated since the '80s will only drive more working-class New Yorkers out of the city. And the consequences won't end there. The attack on public housing is not just an NYC issue. Politicians, landlords and activists are closely following what's happening, because the city has the largest Section 9 program in the U.S. If it is successfully gutted here, there will be a domino effect throughout the nation.

Privatization would also affect the workers who tend and maintain the projects, many of whom live in public housing too. Unions like Laborers Local 79 have been pushing the Trust over PACT, saying that the Trust is beneficial to both tenants and union workers. This isn't true. Although NYCHA will be in control of buildings under the Trust, these projects will no longer be under Section 9 but under Section 8. This effectively makes NYCHA a private landlord, hiding behind the mask of needing to obtain funds to do repairs. While a partnership with the Trust, because it supposedly secures union jobs, may seem like a good thing on the face of it, workers are being misled. Many tenants recognize that the Trust is privatization by another name. By pushing the Trust, union leaders are prioritizing their own short-term gains over the long-term interests of both workers and tenants.

NYCHA claims that workers will be relocated to other developments. This may be true for now. But as the privatization expands and the amount of public housing decreases, NYCHA will have more workers than it wants to keep around, and they will be fired. The leadership of Teamsters Local 237 and other unions are not doing anything to protect the majority black and Hispanic membership from losing their jobs in the projects. Union officials are holding onto NYCHA's word as if it's the truth when we all know NYCHA lies.

This is suicidal. If the leadership does nothing to defend its members or the projects, it is only going to weaken the unions. The working class cannot afford weaker unions, especially when the Trump administration is looking for any opportunity to crush them. It's critical for organizers in the projects to pull the workers who tend to the developments into the struggle to defend Section 9, as it's completely tied to the defense of the working class. Bringing these workers into the fight will not only strengthen the movement, but also expose the union leadership's inability to defend its members. If leaders can't defend their members, they need to be replaced by workers who will.

The Trump administration has attacked unions nonstop. But labor leaders have not mobilized workers to fight back. Instead, they tell workers to look to the Democratic Party while enforcing contractual no-strike clauses. Democrats like Obama, Biden and Cuomo have completely screwed over the working class by ripping up contracts and driving down working and living conditions. This has led to a loss in union power. Many may not realize it, but we feel the squeeze in our everyday lives because of these defeats and loss in power.

Our wages don't meet inflation. Groceries are becoming more expensive. Schools have been defunded. Train and bus fares are increasing while service is declining. And you risk getting robbed or jumped on the train when you're just trying to get to work. Many are stuck in non-union jobs paying poverty-level wages. Now, the ruling class wants to take away public housing, the one thing that gives many minority workers stability in the chaos of NYC. Because they are both under attack, the unions and the projects need to come together and fight their common enemies: the bosses' politicians and the landlords.

The Need for Tenant and Union Control

Most of our working-class brothers and sisters have been priced out of the city. Many others are forced into ghettos that have crumbled to the point that their physical and mental health are being ruined. The conditions are bad and have only deepened racial divisions. This only benefits the ruling class, because united struggle across racial lines is a potential threat to their private property. No matter what they tell us, we don't have to live like this. No matter what they say, we can change things. We are the groundskeepers, maintenance workers, plumbers, electricians, mechanics, housekeepers and cleaners. Many in the projects already have the skills necessary to repair the buildings they live in. This is why a tenant-and-worker-led housing movement could ensure repairs.

NYCHA often doesn't even assign workers to take care of outstanding maintenance tickets. Union and tenant control of repairs would mean taking charge of the ticketing system. It would also mean dispatching workers in partnership with tenants to make a real survey of the repairs needed to get buildings and apartments up to a quality standard. A partnership like this would also help bridge the racial divide among tenants.

NYCHA has said time and again that it doesn't have the manpower to fix all issues. But this problem comes from NYCHA's firing of workers to close a budget deficit created by its own mismanagement. Union control of repairs goes together with union control of hiring, especially when many thousands of people, both in the projects and on the streets, are looking for work. This includes black and Hispanic youth who have been screwed by crumbling schools that look more like prisons.

Youth in the projects have almost no access to decent education or even trade schools that can give them skills to get well-paying union jobs. Because of this, they are forced to find other means to make money, becoming targets of the cops. Union control of hiring would be directly tied to union control of training. The unions would come in, put tools into the youth's hands and train them in a skill. This would open up the opportunity for youth in public housing to get union work and allow them to contribute to the fixing of their homes.

We have to save our homes, but we also have to rebuild them. This can only happen by creating a movement that looks

to place power in the hands of black and Hispanic working-class people who have been segregated into the ghettos and forced to the bottom of society. Workers in the projects, in partnership with tenants, need to take the lead in the movement. But unions organized as a force could change the whole situation, not only in the fight for public housing, but also in the fight against black and Hispanic oppression. It is important to try to mobilize union contingents at housing protests as a first step toward broadening the struggle and overcoming tenants' mistrust of the unions.

Toward Fighting Tenant Councils

Leaders in the projects have to pull the working class into the fight to save Section 9. But some leaders and tenants are suspicious of the unions due to the lived experience of dealing with their response to privatization. But tenant fighters need to be clear: There is a difference between the union leadership and the membership. Current union leaders have sided with and made concessions to industry bosses at the expense of both their members and project residents. One example was the PACT vote at Stanley Isaacs Houses in Manhattan. Building Trades union reps knocked on tenants' doors, not to help them chase PACT out and stop privatization, but to encourage a vote for the Trust privatization scheme.

Why would the union leadership do something like this? These privatization initiatives give union leaderships a shot at big bucks, and they compete with one another to get in. Union leaders make deals with the privatizers to gain representation rights, and the workers are left worse off. This deepens the many divisions in public housing, pitting worker against worker, and workers against tenants. Tenant leaders and residents fighting to win over workers must put a stop to these dividing tactics. On the other hand, the unions need new leadership that will defend public housing and working-class interests. Neither of these things are easy to do, but they are critical if we want to build the movement.

There have been battles throughout different NYCHA developments. Some were about getting out the vote to stop the privatization, like at Stanley Isaacs, Jacob Riis and Coney Island. All these projects were successful in getting "no" votes, but they are now threatened with the loss of funding if they stay under Section 9. This is straight-up blackmail. Other developments, like Fulton and Elliott-Chelsea, have fought to stop the all-out demolition. Some face privatization but aren't being given a say, like the units sacrificed by de Blasio. Each of these situations looks different, but what all tenants have in common is the fight to save public housing from the Democrats and Republicans looking to smash it.

Although the fight is the same, each of these struggles have been fought separately. Some have seen wins, and others are in a bad place because they are isolated. NYCHA and the developers encourage this isolation because no united struggle makes it easier for them to smash public housing. Tenant leaders have to reach out to residents in other buildings and find people who want to fight against the attacks, whether they are facing privatization or not. After that, councils should be set up in each development.

These councils will have to contend with the Tenant Associations (TAs). Many of these TAs are notorious for not doing a damn thing for tenants or for actively helping the privatizers. These people make other TA leaders who are actually fighting the privatization look bad. Part of building the movement is to replace the existing TA leadership with tenants who want to defend the projects. Where this can't be done in short order, councils or committees should be set up to organize tenants. These councils and new TA leaders should look to unite with those already fighting back against the city. Residents need a new leadership of the TAs, just like workers need a new leadership in the unions!

Workers Have Power

The decay of public housing is what happens when the ruling class takes money from basic social programs, used mostly by black and brown people, to fund their forever wars against black and brown people in other countries. As the liberal mask has slipped off this country's rulers, they move to outright crush the oppressed and score record profits while doing that. Right now, the working class and people in the ghetto feel powerless. This must change. The working class, black and brown masses need to build their own power. But that's not possible while begging the Democratic Party of genocide, war and black oppression to save us.

Many tenant leaders feel they have no choice but to look to the Democrats because the working class has no leading role (or no role at all) in the fight for housing. But tenant workers have power. You maintain public housing. You are the hospital workers, laborers, MTA conductors, cab drivers and teachers. You are what makes this city never sleep. You move NYC and keep it running. And you do ***not*** have to accept decisions made to chase you out of a city you built. We can stop the privatization and rebuild our homes. Uniting the struggles of the oppressed will make this a real movement that can defend the projects and end black, Hispanic and working-class oppression.

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